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SUBJECT: LEBANON: MP MOSBAH AHDAB AND ALLIES SEEK NEW
POLITICAL GROUPING, PRIVATE SECTOR RECONSTRUCTION FUND

REF: BEIRUT 002874

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: 1.4 (d)

¶1. (SBU) Member of Parliament for Tripoli Mosbah Ahdab requested a meeting in the Ambassador's office on 9/7 to discuss an initiative to provide assistance to Lebanon's war-damaged private sector and a political initiative to provide an alternative to Lebanon's rigid confessional groupings. Ahdab brought with him a marketing team: Eli Khoury, political activist and CEO of Saatchi and Saatchi Levant; Samir Nader, political advisor (who was formerly Michel Aoun's son-in-law but broke with Aoun both domestically and politically); and Elena Anouti, a Project Manager at Quantum Communications. Polcouns was notetaker.

A New Political Grouping

¶2. (C) Khoury provided the group's marketing strategy for a new political grouping which would join and reinvigorate the March 14 bloc. He saluted the "progress of the last two years" and said it must be strengthened. Lebanon's social progress is closest now to stability than at any time since the Lebanese Civil War. However, the lack of a Christian side of the "tripod" is an impediment. The GOL is centrist but, unless there is a counter to Hizballah's rhetoric and pressures, could develop rightist tendencies -- which Khoury defined as an alignment with Tehran. Right now, for Lebanese political figures to express alignment with "the free world" creates a political liability, while expressing opposite sentiments may boost, or at least not hurt, their popularity.

¶3. (C) Even the March 14 grouping, which Khoury described as remaining "70 percent" pro-US, needs to be committed to Resolutions 1559 and 1701 and would secretly welcome pressure from a new group in that direction, Khoury predicted. There also needs to be public debunking of Hizballah's victory rhetoric following the July-August conflict.

¶4. (C) The new grouping already has the membership of two MPs (Ahdab and Samir Franjeh) and has received words of support from Saad al-Hariri and Walid Jumblatt. It has also received discreet support from Tyre Shi'ite Mufti and Hizballah critic Said Ali al-Amin. While there is no official name yet, its founders have considered "Freedom League" in English and Tajamaa lil Jomhoria in Arabic, recalling the French political party Rassemblement pour la Republique and

suggesting a political grouping rather than a new party. The new grouping would stress its Lebanese identity.

¶5. (C) MP Ahdab elaborated, there are two factors which stop people from speaking out. One is the phenomenon referred to as "impunity" -- i.e., as Lebanon saw yesterday, political assassinations and assassination attempts have gone unpunished. A second factor is the failure of the political leadership to truly lead, such as taking politically difficult or courageous positions that shake up the status quo. Ahdab added that the new group would push for accountability and leadership, but that it would do so in coordination and cooperation with others. It would take a lesson from its experience with Rafiq al-Hariri, the founder of the Mustaqbal ("Future") Party, who did not truly trust those who wished to collaborate with Mustaqbal without being members. Ahdab added that there is now political freedom for Shi'ites to disagree with Hizballah, and the new grouping could provide additional cover for them.

¶6. (SBU) Nader stressed the need to boost the political life of Lebanon. He described a number of "political start-ups" to which the new political grouping could give a platform and funding. There are also a great number of the "politically homeless" -- i.e., Shi'a who are disaffected with Hizballah and Amal; Druze independents, who thus far have been hard to find; and others. He stressed the need to "rekindle the March 14 movement".

Private Sector Fund

¶7. (SBU) The group's second initiative comprises a "trust

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fund" for Lebanese reconstruction which would focus on reinvigorating the private sector. The Fund has already been set up by Swiss-based Lebanese, Nader explained. This group has also hired a Swiss firm to verify its not-for-profit status. It is now seeking funding beyond the \$100,000 seed money that has been contributed so far.

¶8. (SBU) The group asked for a "USG blessing" of the new foundation. (Note: This may be the same foundation pitched to us on September 6 by Ghattas Khoury (reftel); while they were not sure, the group said they had indeed raised the topic with Mustaqbal representatives. End Note.) This blessing would be important to establish the anti-corruption credentials of the foundation and to provide potential tax deductions for US-based donors.

¶9. (SBU) The Ambassador and Polcouns promised to help the group coordinate with USG agencies on the reconstruction initiative; and to remain in contact regarding its new political grouping and help them to arrange meetings with interested parties in Washington week after next.

Comment

¶10. (C) Eli Khoury and his Quantum colleagues were the brains behind last year's "Independence 05" striking visual images that accompanied the "Cedar Revolution." With his flair for marketing and his commitment to Lebanese sovereignty, independence, and democracy, Khoury is a great asset for this new grouping. Ahdab, as one of only two Sunni MPs who dared to defy Syria's orders to extend Emile Lahoud's presidential term, has already proven courageous. And Sami Nader's prominence in this new group is an important signal to others who may once have been believers in Michel Aoun but have become disillusioned -- they, too, do not need to remain "politically homeless."

¶11. (C) While the ideas expressed this morning are still preliminary, there is one part of their proposal that we find especially appealing: there are no big names that dominate

the group. Whereas all of Lebanon's other major political trends are personality and confessionally driven (Hariri, Berri, Nasrallah, Jumblatt, etc.), this "Freedom League" has the potential to be truly democratic and cross-confessional in spirit. That means that it just may be possible to attract independent Shia (as Khoury, Ahdab, and Nadar hope), as the Shia who don't like Hizballah and Amal currently have no other natural place to go. If the group builds momentum, we expect that some March 14 politicians may not be altogether comfortable with its reform message. But we think that the "Freedom League" is an exciting idea with great potential. We hope that it can overcome all of the built-in Lebanese disadvantages to this kind of movement and grows behind its currently quite nascent stage.

FELTMAN